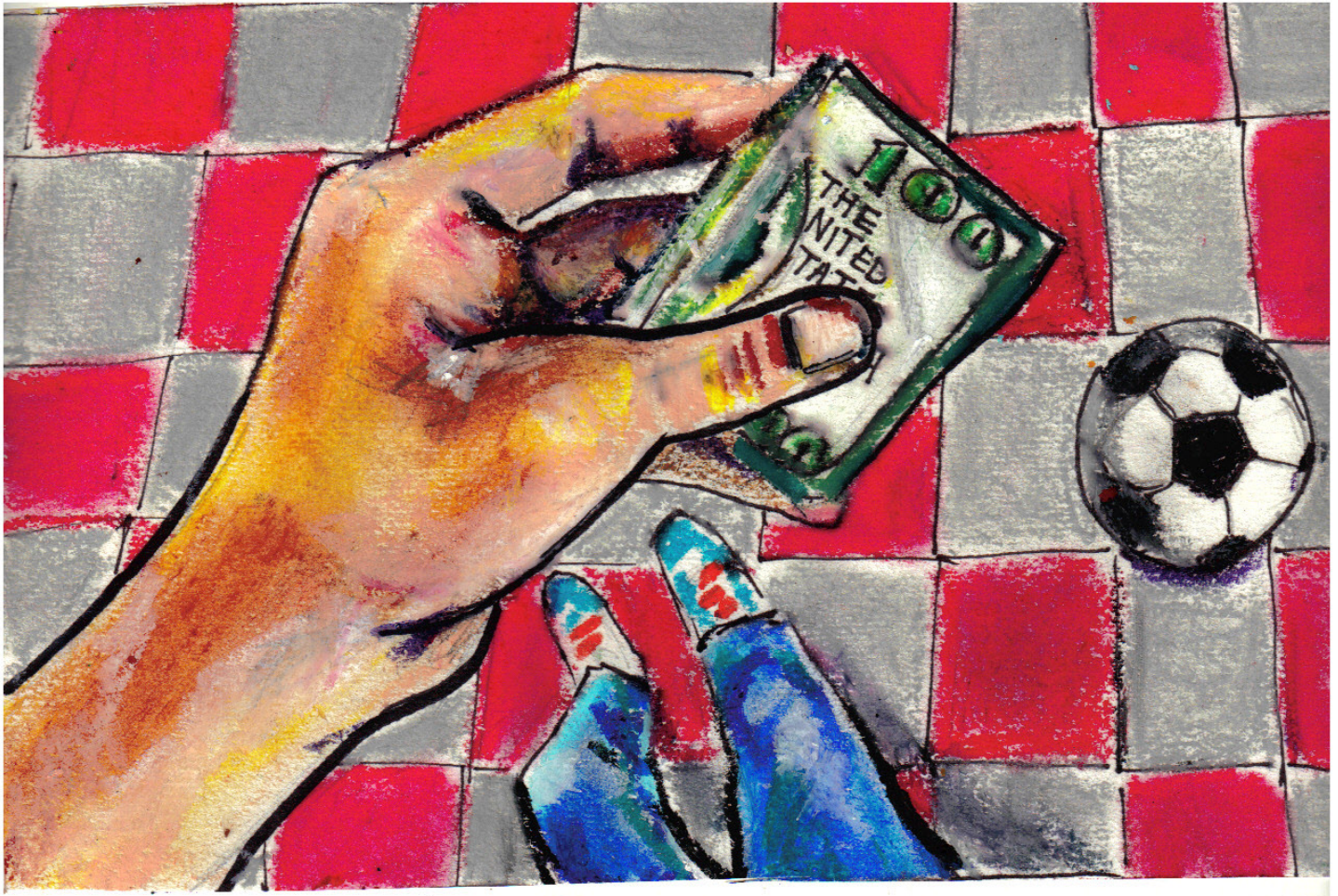


HUNDRED DOLLAR CAT

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Chapter 1: Unexpected Cash



“BEN! Ben..ny!” I tried to block out Mom’s voice by pulling the pillow over my head. I still hoped to escape back into sleep because I knew it was Saturday, and I didn’t have to get up for school. But then the pillow was pulled off, and bright sunlight penetrated my closed eyelids. Someone was shaking me.

“Get up! Remember, I told you last night that we had to go pick up a dresser I found in the newspaper. Now get out of bed!” Mom demanded. I heard her open my curtains and then hurry out.

Slowly, I stretched my legs, still wanting to sleep longer. But just as I was drifting off, I felt a weight on my bed. Opening my eyes just a tiny bit, I saw my older brother Conner sitting next to me. He started rubbing his fingers up and down my ribs and said in a loud voice, “Get moving, kid. Mom needs your help.”

I opened my eyes and grabbed his fingers. “Quit! That tickles. I’m getting up.” Crawling out of bed, I threw on yesterday’s jeans and t-shirt, and walked into the kitchen. Mom was sitting at the table holding a cup of coffee. Last night’s paper was folded open to the classified section with a black circle around one ad. A plate with toast and jam was on the table. I poured myself a glass of milk and sat down across from my mom. “Good morning, Ben. Hurry and eat some toast. I promised we’d be there before ten.”

“Why doesn’t Conner have to help?” I finished one piece of toast and started on another piece.

“Conner’s working today. In fact, I need to leave him lunch money.” She set out a five dollar bill with a note.

“Besides, it’s not that big of a job to load a dresser. We should be home in an hour. Now wipe the jam off your face, and let’s get going.” She picked up the keys and ushered me through the door.

It was a chilly fall day. Our lawn was littered with a design of brightly colored maple leaves. I had planned

on calling my best friend Nate who lived on the farm down the road to see if we could kick around the soccer ball before our first game on Tuesday. There weren't many kids living out in the country, and I felt lucky to have a friend my age next door. But now I'd have to wait until the afternoon to call him.

In the car, Mom smiled at me. "I'm glad you're here to help. It shouldn't be too hard to find this place. It's just over in Stockton. We'll be in and out in no time."

But it took almost an hour to find the house, even with Google Search. When we got to the door, the lady was still in her robe and looked surprised to see us. "Oh yes, the dresser," she said, and led us to the bedroom. Obviously, they were still using the dresser because she began to pull stuff out of the drawers and throw the clothes on the bed.

I stared out the window, not wanting to see her socks and pajamas piling up. Then the three of us slowly carried the dresser out of the house, careful not to scrape the walls. We loaded it into the back of our Blazer. Mom's idea of a quick errand took forever!

As we drove away, Mom bragged, "What a steal! It's in great shape for a used dresser." She was grinning from ear to ear as we drove back toward town.

"Hey, it's almost noon. How 'bout we stop at Toppers for lunch?" She pulled into the parking lot of our local restaurant, famous for good, cheap burgers.

"Couldn't we just go home? I want Nate to come over. You know we have our first soccer game next week."

"We have to eat lunch anyway, and you'll have plenty of time to hang out with Nate this afternoon."

Toppers was crowded. Luckily, we were seated right away. I ordered a burger and fries. "Hi Mrs. Manchester. Hi Ben." Gwen Johnson, Conner's girlfriend, raced by with a tray piled high with sandwiches. I couldn't imagine balancing a tray full of food.

I dug into my burger while Mom picked away at a side salad. She was always dieting. If I ate like her, I'd starve. Finishing the last bite, I started to slide out of the booth just as the waitress refilled Mom's coffee cup and left the check.

"Can't we leave, Mom?" I moaned. "I don't want to waste all day here."

She rolled her eyes and began rustling in her purse. She set three dollars on the table for a tip. "Listen, here's a twenty." Mom handed me the money with the check. "You go up and pay while I use the restroom. I'll meet you by the door." She hurried away.

I stood in line at the cash register. There were a lot of people, and the line moved slowly. At my turn, I handed the cashier our check for \$8.87 with the twenty dollar bill. She handed me back some change and two bills stacked together. I spread the bills apart, a dollar on top; and then instead of a ten dollar bill, there was ... a HUNDRED dollar bill! In that moment, time stood still. What was I to do?

I froze, staring at the large bill. The face of Ben Franklin looked back at me. I knew that I should immediately tell the girl about her mistake and give her back the hundred. That was the right thing to do. But she was already turning to the person behind me. She didn't realize her mistake. I had a free hundred in my hand. Should I call her attention to the mistake or keep the money?

I looked at the large bill still in my hand. The cashier took the next person's money. No one was watching me. I put the bill into my pocket and quickly left. Mom was waiting at the door, and we walked out to the car.